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ABSTRACT

Using the pocket classics can be a painless way to introduce the classics to eighth-grade students. Condensed versions of the classics can take the sting out of the reading, stimulate students' interest, and help prepare them for high school. To offer students in one eighth-grade class some control over their own learning, a contract system was used in which each student agreed to the amount of work they were willing to do over the 3-week period. A day's lesson consisted of a short biographical sketch about a classical author, and then silent reading. Once a week an excerpt of a classical film was shown. Additional exposure to the classics can be planned at Halloween (reading horror stories by Edgar Allen Poe) or in conjunction with other units (producing a radio play version of Jules Verne's "Around the World in Eighty Days" to accompany a unit on the history of flight). After studying classical mysteries (Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie, or those by Edgar Allen Poe), students can write their own mini-mysteries. Using some imagination, material for a classical unit is everywhere. Students are enthusiastic, derive a sense of accomplishment, and sometimes find the dilemmas of their own lives reflected in the classics. (SR)

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INTRODUCING THE CLASSICS

TO

RELUCTANT READERS

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Cy-Fair ISD

Houston, Texas

Poster Session presented at the IRA National Convention held in Las Vegas, Nevada in May, 1991.

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INTRODUCING THE CLASSICS TO RELUCTANT READERS

Looking back over the years, I can see that I got hooked on the comic-book format in my college days. My supervising teacher, Dr. Phyllis Gore, collected comic books and I was fascinated with the concept of using them as a teaching tool. When I taught Title I Reading in North Carolina, I used the Now Age Illustrated Classics Kits (1973) with my students. They completed the activities in the back of the book, and then listened to the taped version. There was a colored version of the classics put out by King Features that our ninth graders used. Unfortunately, when I contacted King-Knight Riders a few years ago, I was told that the publishing division of that company had dissolved and those comic books were no longer available.

I wanted to prepare my eighth grade students for high school in a painless way. I can remember how I groaned when I attempted to read the original Moby Dick or even the Scarlet Letter. How about a condensed version that would take the sting out of the reading and maybe even stimulate a little interest? Kathy Whitworth, a dear friend of mine, introduced me to Pocket Classics (1984) via Walgreens.

Walgreen was selling individual titles three for $1.00 and Kathy had picked up enough titles to teach her sixth grade students fact-and-opinion skills. The students enjoyed the books so much that decided to expand her idea. My project was made easier when I bought my own set of books from a TV ad I saw when I was on vacation. Presently, my school has four sets of pocket classics.

The first year I introduced the classics, it was for a three-week period. I had noticed during my years of teaching eigth grade, that the students really wanted some control over their own learning. Offer, Ostrov and Howard explain "that as a person proceeds from childhood through adolescence and to adulthood, he wants to be his own navigator regardless of how rough the sea gets."(1981) So I devised a contract system where each student could test his limit on how much (s)he could read in a three week period. Each student had to sign a contract agreeing to the amount of work they were willing to do. Each one got a copy of the contract and I kept a copy. They received their grade based on the quality of their work as well as quantity. A day's lesson consisted of a short biographical sketch about a classical author, and then silent reading. The biographical information came directly from each book. All I did was add five short skill-related questions. Once a week I showed an excerpt of a classical film. The Houston Public Library has a film

library and with a special library card, I could check out these films free of charge. Most were only thirty minutes long. I regularly showed Kidnapped, Moby Dick and The Invisible Man.

The students loved it! One of their all-time classical favorites was Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky. (1984) This book has a dilemma that has never been resolved, even today. How do you go on with your life when your conscience tells you that you have done wrong? According to Kaplan, this is one of the major challenges to the youth of the modern world - the relationship of their own personal history and the history of the rest of the world.(1984) Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen(1984) shows that the shallowness of girls one hundred years ago wasn't much different from the shallowness of some girls today. When youth question the world and its values, etc., they can see through the literature of the classics that others have questioned, too. At a time when youth are evaluating their elders and want desperately to believe in something, the classics give respectability and credibility to the old.

With the encouragement of my students, I planned additional exposure to the classics. At Halloween, instead of reading ghost stories, we read horror stories by Edgar Allan Poe. I used the Scope play version of Around the World in Eighty Days by Jules Verne (1989)

when we begin our unit on the history of flight. Last year I used the SVE kit on the Classics. (1983) The scripts to the filmstrips were included and we used those scripts to "produce" radio plays complete with sound effects. Each class produced a different classic and then we listened to our finished products augmented by the filmstrips. A vote was taken on the best production. This year my students studied classical mysteries instead and read Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" and "Sherlock Holmes' Adventure of the Speckled Band." We read an article about Agatha Christie and watched Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window" (from the Public Library) The culminating activity was for the students to write their own mini-mystery. We used the guidelines in Scholastic Scope(Oct. 19, 1990) and then using composite face pieces, they constructed the face of either their detective or villain.

If you collect old textbooks and use your imagination, you can find material for a classical unit anywhere. I intend to continue compiling stories that I can add to my units because I have found that the interests and the abilities of my students vary from year to year, too.

Regardless of what prior activities we do, at the end of each year I like to use the pocket classics. I think it gives my students a sense of accomplishment to be able to say that they have read and are familiar

with some classics. Hopefully it helps prepare them for high school, but also it shows them they are not alone in the world. Some of the problems they suffer with are the same problems that people of long ago suffered with, too.

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